

## Lebanon comes to London



**Sheikh a leg** Dancers get their kicks; Alissar Caracalla (right)

Caracalla Dance Theatre has been a uniting force in Lebanon since 1970.

**Fiona Campbell** talks to its choreographer, Alissar Caracalla, about sexism, civil war and being the Middle East's own Simon Cowell

For a dance company to survive for more than 40 years is quite an achievement. To do so amid a vicious civil war is nothing short of a miracle. Yet, with their relentless force of hope over despair, Lebanon's Caracalla Dance Theatre – who arrive in London for two shows this week – have managed to achieve just that. 'For us there are no barriers. You can't put a barrier on art,' says choreographer Alissar Caracalla. 'If you want to kill yourself and bomb the country, go ahead, but we're going to keep on working.'

Throughout the conflict in Lebanon, which lasted from 1975 to 1990, Caracalla continued to rehearse and perform. 'When we were at home, the company would move along the borders from east to west Beirut,' says Alissar. 'If there was bombing in the west we'd get in cars and go to the east.

When we were on tour, Lebanon started to call Caracalla Dance Theatre ambassadors of the country because it gave such a different image to the outside world.'

Dance has always been deeply embedded in Lebanese culture, especially at festivals and weddings, but until recently it was never considered to be a viable career option. Caracalla remains the only dance theatre company in the Arab Middle East, founded in 1970 by Alissar's father, Abdel-Halim Caracalla, who studied modern dance with Martha Graham in the 1960s. However, Alissar believes that attitudes are beginning to shift: 'Perceptions of dance are changing for many reasons: the internet, TV and the Caracalla Dance School,' she says. The school, set up by Alissar in 1997, has since grown into an impressive cultural centre with a theatre, costume shop, editing suites and more than 1,000 students.

Alissar is also a judge on Lebanon's answer to 'The X Factor', called 'Star Academy', a role she credits with raising the profile of dance in the Middle East. 'In the TV work I've done I've been a bit anti that "exotic" perception of dance and tried to approach it from a very disciplined, balletic training, so people have

started to understand dance more and view it as an art, an education.'

Through her work on TV, Alissar has become something of a celebrity in the Middle East, but admits that fronting the company as a woman in such a conservative climate hasn't always been easy. 'At the beginning, when we would travel in the Middle East, my father would do all the talking,' she says. 'From day one I had to put thought into how I was going to portray myself. In Lebanon, however, it was different, the name Caracalla comes with so much respect people don't dare to disrespect me, whether I am a woman or not.'

Even now, Alissar explains that careful consideration is given to every aspect of the production when travelling outside Lebanon. 'When we go to other Middle Eastern countries we alter some of the costumes, cover the stomach or put leggings on underneath, in case it's see-through.

I think you can go wrong or right when it comes to dealing with the body, there's a very fine line.'

While Caracalla's costumes retain an air of modesty, their production costs certainly don't. In their latest show, 'Zayed and the Dream', a homage to the late Sheikh Zayed, founder of the UAE, the stage is a whirlwind of elaborate props, booming voiceovers and palpable enthusiasm from the 100-strong cast. Their brand of



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bombastic dance drama might not be to everyone's taste, but their abundant optimism is difficult not to succumb to. At a show in Paris earlier this year, the theatre was throbbing with energy and by the finale the audience were bouncing along in the aisles. 'I think the international audience appreciate the work because it's so different and there are no limitations in the West,' says Alissar. 'The crazier you go the better.' 'Zayed and the Dream' is at the London Coliseum, Aug 1-3. See listings.